

Deseret News (Salt Lake City, Utah)

October 11, 2003, Saturday

**SECTION:** WIRE; Pg. A01

**LENGTH:** 621 words

**HEADLINE:** Hatch pushes a study for schools

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**BODY:**

WASHINGTON -- As a first step aiming to help Utah win hundreds of millions of dollars a year more for **education**, Sen. Orrin Hatch is calling for a national study to ascertain why Western states are constantly falling behind in school funding.

Westerners think they already know the answer: The high percentage of federally owned land in the West, which is not taxable, prevents raising enough property tax for schools. They want the federal government to come up with more money for them.

But the first step is to build their case with reliable federal data, and Hatch, R-Utah, is seeking to order a study that could do that.

Hatch, co-chairman of the Western Senate Coalition, says, "The growth of per-pupil funding in Utah is about half that of states in the East -- and this is happening in all the Western states. Our **education** funding is falling behind while school enrollment is growing. We need to determine the extent of this emerging crisis."

To build support for that, Hatch's office hosted a briefing this week for congressional staffers from 12 Western states that could benefit. It featured a presentation about the **Action Plan for Public Land and Education** (APPLE) initiated by the Utah Legislature.

"School funding in Utah stinks," Utah Rep. Steve Urquhart, R-St. George, a founder of APPLE, told the briefing. "**Education** funding in all your states stinks."

He said APPLE's studies found that Western states have tax rates that are just as high as elsewhere -- and they devote just as much of their overall budgets to **education**. But they have far lower growth in per-pupil expenditures, and have higher classroom sizes that are growing bigger. All that is projected to worsen.

"The problem lies at the feet of the federal government and the enormous amount of land it owns in the Western states," Urquhart said.

"No state east of an imaginary vertical line from Montana to New Mexico has more than 14 percent of its land federally owned," he said. "No state west of that imaginary line has less than 27 percent (except Hawaii). Four Western states have more than 62 percent of their land federally owned (Alaska, Idaho, Nevada and Utah)," he said.

He said that hurts in several ways:

First, he said most Western states did not benefit much from promises at statehood to sell off federal land and give 5 percent of the proceeds to the states for schools. Based on the value of recent sales of Utah-owned land, he said APPLE figures the 12 Western states lost \$14 billion from that. He said Utah lost \$836 million.

Urquhart said he and other Western leaders would like the federal government to come up with that money to be put into state trust funds for schools.

Additionally, he said APPLE figures that states lose \$4.2 billion a year from not being able to tax federal lands in their states -- Utah itself loses \$214 million a year. He would like to see the federal government provide a hefty share of that to states.

The federal government is also not sharing enough of its mineral royalties, or puts strings on them that prevent helping **education**, he said.

Also, state school trust lands often cannot be developed because of restrictions on surrounding federal lands, so the federal government should do more to trade out such lands.

Hatch said, "The bottom line is that Western states like Utah have less money to pay for public **education**, and the situation only seems to be getting worse. We need to figure out the full extent of the problem and reverse this trend as soon as possible."

The Western Senate Coalition is a bipartisan caucus of senators from 19 Western states. Hatch is the co-chairman along with Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont.